

## If You Ever Change Your Mind by ohmybgosh

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**Summary:**

First they were something, then they were nothing, then they were everything.

Or; the one where Steve fucks everything up, and tries to make it right again.

# If You Ever Change Your Mind

## Author's Note:

- For lymricks.

I accidentally shipped Callahan and Powell in this fic and now it's all I can think about whoops. The title is from my fave, Sam Cooke <3 I missed my favorite city so I wrote Steve taking a trip there.

I hope you like it darling!!

Steve always assumed that he'd be the one to end it. Not because he was usually the one to end things, in fact it was the other way round. Steve was almost always the one for whom things ended, left bewildered in the dust of an abruptly over relationship, because he thought it was going well.

But with Billy it was different.

They weren't technically dating. He'd told Billy that; Billy called the late night drives and the trips to the empty matinee showing "dates" and Steve assumed he was joking. He did stuff like that with all his guy friends, the ones he still hung out with.

Things with Billy were so easy.

He thought they'd have been tough, after everything, but they weren't.

They were awkward; sometimes Steve got too touchy and Billy flinched away from him like his hands were a hot iron. Sometimes Billy said hurtful things and didn't apologize. Sometimes he said nothing at all; sometimes he got up and left Steve without a word, without looking back, and the next day it went back to normal and he acted as if it never happened.

Steve got *prickly* at that, not annoyed per se, not hurt, but prickly. Uncomfortable, a feeling he couldn't place bubbling up in his stomach when Billy left without saying goodbye. But he didn't think

about it. Because they weren't dating. It was just. No, not just sex. They spent time together. They hung out, mostly in Steve's car, sometimes in Steve's house.

Once Billy came over, and it was one of those nights where he didn't say anything. When Steve touched him he didn't flinch, he shrunk in on himself, and when he brushed past Steve he lay on top of the covers, curling up. He reminded Steve of a millipede. When Steve was little he liked to poke them and watch them roll up like a cinnamon bun.

This night with Billy Steve watched for a moment, feeling a bit fascinated like a junior scientist again. He observed, he made an assessment, and he experimented, carefully climbing into bed beside Billy, curling around behind him and slinging his arm around Billy's middle. Billy froze for a second. Then he shifted slightly, pressing into Steve's stomach, and they lay like that, breathing together, until Billy's breath fell out of sync and he fell asleep, snoring gently. Steve got up to make tea. He wasn't sure what exactly was wrong but he knew something was. His mom used to make him tea when he was sad, or sick, or anything at all.

They never talked about a future. They talked about a lot of things, even personal things, but never about each other, never about The Thing with each other, like a third person in the room they both ignored. Steve didn't think about the third person. Billy cast nervous looks at it, as if waiting for it to start shouting at him, to grab him by the back of his hair or slap him across the face.

So they never talked about the future.

One night, lying on the hood of Steve's car on a clear night in May, half stoned, Billy sitting up cross legged, hunched over and rolling another joint, they almost talked about it. Billy eyes focused, a sort of clarity and attention that Steve noticed only marijuana and sex brought him, tongue between his teeth, carefully rolled the joint between his thumbs and forefingers.

Satisfied, he held it up, squinting in the moonlight.

"Thing of beauty," he said. Steve smiled and tugged at Billy's sleeve.

"Nice work. Can we smoke now, or are you gonna stare at it some more?"

Billy gave him a look and lay down beside Steve, scooting closer so that their arms were touching. Billy only ever did that when they were high. He didn't touch Steve when he wasn't; even after sex he'd lie in bed an inch away from Steve, didn't really meet his eyes, only stared at the corner of the room, as if The Thing was there, saying something only he could hear.

He lit the spliff and took a drag, exhaling slowly, watching the smoke curl up in the air until it dissipated. He passed it over to Steve.

"Where're you going, after this?"

"Uh. Home." Steve turned to look at him. Billy was looking up at the stars.

"No. I mean after you graduate. Where are you going?"

"Oh." Steve turned back to the sky. He took a drag, closing his eyes and letting the smoke fill his lungs, imagining it blanket his insides. He exhaled slowly through his nose. Billy taught him that. The first time Steve tried he choked, and Billy laughed while Steve sputtered with tears in his eyes. "I dunno. College was the plan."

"Not anymore?"

"Maybe." Steve passed the spliff back. Billy took it, careful not to let their fingers brush. "Not sure. Just, away from here, I guess."

"From Hawkins?"

"Yeah. I can't stand it here. There's nothing left for me. Mom and Dad know I'm not staying."

Billy was silent for a moment. When he spoke he sounded far away, and Steve wasn't sure whether it was the weed, which made his head sort of fuzzy, or the way in which Billy shifted away from him, inch by inch. "There's nothing here for you?"

Steve turned to look at him. Billy was sitting up now; his shoulders

were tense. Something at the back of his head told Steve to shut it, but he'd never been good at thinking before he spoke. "Not really."

Billy nodded slowly, face steeling over. He took one last drag and flicked the butt into the grass, hopping off the hood and crushed the smoldering end of the spliff under his heel.

"Gotta go," he said.

"I can drive you," Steve said, sitting up. He got that prickly feeling again, and if it weren't for the slurriness of his brain and the haziness in his eyes he might've been able to place it.

"I'll walk." Billy was already turning away.

"Billy -"

"Fuck off."

Steve squinted after him.

Just like that he was gone, and he didn't come back this time. And they didn't talk about it the next day but they didn't talk at all. Steve felt like a cactus until graduation, prickly on the outside because Billy wouldn't look at him, sad and squishy on the inside because now he had no passenger on his late night drives.

Just like that there was no more whisper of a future. Steve had thought it wouldn't bother him, but it did. It needled at the back of his mind.

Graduation came went, and so did Steve. He packed his bags, kissed his mother and shook his father's hand and drove out of Indiana, just him and his Beamer.

He told his parents he was headed to Chicago to work at his Uncle's firm. He hadn't spoken to his Uncle since Christmas, and he knew it was a matter of days, possibly even hours before they figured it out. So he kept driving until he reached a small motel in the outskirts of Ohio. He hadn't planned on a destination, just a coast. The west, California in particular, felt personal somehow, and whenever Steve thought about it he felt like the whole state was unwelcoming, only

to him. So he settled on the east. He had a cousin in Boston, and he wasn't entirely sure how to get there, but he knew the general direction and he'd bought a map at the gas station. He lay it out on the lumpy motel bed and traced a route to Boston with a highlighter he found in the bedside table beside a worn Bible.

When he reached the city early one morning he headed straight for the harbor, leaving his car at a park in favor of the T. He'd never taken public transportation before. It took a lot of confused staring at the line map and finally asking the haggard looking man in the ticket booth for directions, but he made it.

When he got there he stood on the docks, smelled the salt and watched the late fishing boats heading out for the day. It was gray and dreary that morning. The dock was wet but he sat on the edge anyway, pulling his tennies off and rolling his pants up to his ankles. He stared down, at the legs of the dock covered with algae, snails stuck there, seeking refuge from the waves.

He felt prickly again, and this time he could place the feeling: loneliness. He was lonely. Not in general but in longing for something, someone in particular.

He wondered what it was about the sea that called to him, and why it was that the Pacific hit too close to home. It was cliche, but Steve was a hopeless romantic at heart, and Billy's eyes were like the sea, weren't they. Bright and blue when he smiled and stormy gray when he frowned.

He pushed himself up, slipping his shoes back on. To get rid of the uneasy fluttering in his stomach he bought a basket of fries from a food cart nearby.

He stared at a payphone outside of a convenience store and stress ate the whole basket of fries. He knew he needed to call his parents. By now, they probably figured out he never made it to Chicago. His dad might've even called the police. He shuddered, thinking of Hopper wearily dragging him back to Hawkins.

And he needed his cousin's number from them. He couldn't remember her name. Some sort of flower? But she was his place to

stay, he was banking on that.

He crossed the street and jogged to the payphone. He held his breath and paid the toll, dialed the number, and waited.

“Harrington. Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“*Steven* .”

“Mom -”

“Where the *hell* are you?”

Steve stood there for another fifteen minutes, adding more coins to his time, wincing as his mother’s voice rose in pitch (“Henry said you never even spoke to him, Steve” and “What were you thinking?” and “Your father is so disappointed, he refuses to come to the phone”).

He finally got his cousin’s number after ten minutes of apologies.

His cousin’s name was Rose. She picked him up a the car park a couple hours later and gave him the biggest hug he’d had in a while, even though he couldn’t remember ever meeting her.

“You were this tall when I saw you last!” She held her hand at her waist. She was shorter than him by about a head. She was thirty-something and had a bob of messy dark hair. She loved his hair, “Never cut it,” she said, and it took Steve some getting used to because every morning at home his dad would look up from his paper and scoff at Steve’s bedhead.

Rose lived alone with an old Pomeranian named Nancy Reagan, Nance for short. Steve smiled at that, and he had half a mind to call Hawkins and tell Nancy about it.

Nance the Pomeranian could barely see. She had a back leg that gave her trouble. She slept a lot and smelled like an old dog. She barked when she wasn’t sleeping or eating. She loved to eat, she scrabbled at Steve’s legs when he and Rose settled on the couch for dinner, the TV on. “Just say no,” Rose always said, and cackled, wiping tears from

her eyes at her own joke.

"I voted for Carter, of course."

Steve thought it would be hard to settle there. And it was difficult; he got lost almost every day for the first week. It was expensive, much more so than he would've thought. He tried to pay Rose for rent but she wouldn't have it. She just told him to do the dishes and take Nance for walks when she, Rose, worked.

Steve thought about getting a job. But there was something that felt permanent about that. And he couldn't place the reason that permanency felt terrifying to him. He still felt lonely, less so with Rose and Nance. But still lonely.

He stayed for two months. By that time, his money dried up, and he wasn't going to call home for money. He might get it, but he'd have to listen to a lecture for half an hour.

It came as a small relief when Dustin reached him at Rose's place. He got the number from Mike, who begrudgingly got it from Nancy, who got it from Steve's mom.

He shouted a lot when Steve picked up the phone. Steve had to hold the receiver a foot away from his face while Dustin chanted his name. Nance lifted her head up from her spot on the couch and yipped in annoyance at Steve.

Dustin finally lowered his voice and Nance put her head back down to nap.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me you were leaving," Dustin complained. Steve grimaced at that; he did feel bad about not telling Dustin. But he couldn't work out how to do it.

"I'm sorry."

"Boston, huh? How's that?"

"Busy. Lots of pigeons."

"Cool. Hey, listen, you're not going to believe this. This kid at school,

major jerk, Troy, was picking on Will. Called him a bad word. And Mike and Lucas were getting ready to kick him, but the Max barrels out of nowhere and socks him right in the eye. He *cried*, Steve. I kid you not.”

“Whoa. Hey, how is Max?”

“Max? Good, I guess.”

“And...everyone else?” He wasn’t sure how to ask about Billy.

“Good.”

“How’s your mom?”

“Good.” Dustin’s voice left the receiver for a second. “She says hi. And - *okay*, mom - she misses you. And hopes you’re doing well. Ugh.”

Steve smiled. “I miss you guys. How’s the new cat?”

“Oh, shit. I forgot to tell you. He died.”

“Oh. Dustin -”

“Nah, it’s ok. No you-know-whats. Just got hit by a car. We went to the shelter yesterday. Mom wants another. I think we should just get a goldfish and call it a day.”

“What about a dog?” Steve asked, glancing over at Nance, who snorted in her sleep. He was getting fond of her.

“A dog? No way. You have to like, walk them and shit. Sorry, mom. Will used to have a dog.” Dustin paused thoughtfully.

Steve twirled his finger around the phone line and bit his lip. He could hear Dustin talking to his mom in the background.

He looked around the tiny apartment. He liked it here. He liked Rose a lot, and Nance was growing on him. But he was out of money. And he was still lonely. Talking to Dustin enhanced that feeling. He didn’t miss Hawkins. He liked being in the city; he liked the noise, apart

from the sirens at three in the morning; he liked the Public Garden and the boats; he liked the disorganization of the city, despite how often he got lost; he loved the steamed buns and sweet tea Rose brought back from Chinatown. But he did miss Dustin, much more than he thought he would. And Claudia Henderson. And Nancy. And his parents. And even the kids, even Hopper, even Jonathan Byers.

And Billy. He missed Billy so much. He thought it would be easy. He didn't look back when he left; he thought he was leaving nothing behind in Hawkins. He thought there had been nothing to stay for.

And it was probably too late to mend that now.

"Hey, Dustin?"

"Huh?"

"I, um. I might be coming back, for little while."

Dustin started shouting again and Steve had to hold the phone away from his ear once more, while Nance barked irritably at him.

In two days he said goodbye to Rose and Nance, and promised he'd be back soon.

He didn't stop and stay anywhere on the way back. He fueled the 15 hour trip with coffee and cigarettes (Marb Reds, like Billy), with cheap pastries from gas stations, and with Phil Collins, with Queen, and with the one AC/DC Billy left in his car.

He was exhausted by the time he got home. For all her lectures, when Steve pulled into the driveway his mom came charging out, silk nightgown on, and pulled him into the tightest hug she'd given him since Elementary School. His dad didn't hug him, but he didn't look as disappointed as Steve thought he'd be, and he did put a warm hand on Steve's shoulder and say, "Good to have you back, kid." He hadn't called Steve "kid" since preschool. It was as close as his dad ever got to a hug.

He slept in until noon the next day. The first thing he did was call Rose. The second thing he did was call Dustin, and they made plans to meet at Dustin's for dinner.

The third thing he did was call Billy.

Billy didn't answer but Max did.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Max?"

"Who's calling?"

"Steve."

"Steve?"

"Yeah. Um, how are you?"

"Uh. Fine. You?"

"Good."

There was an awkward pause, in which Steve could hear Max put her hand over the phone, whispering to someone else in the room. Steve couldn't make out any of the words but his heart leapt at someone else's voice, deeper than Max's, responding.

"Max?"

"Yup."

"Is Billy there?"

There was another pause. Steve heard more frantic whispering and the slam of a door.

"No."

"Oh. Could you tell him I called?"

"Sure."

"Actually, scratch that. Sorry. Just, um. Tell him to meet me tonight. If he wants to. I'll be at JD's at 8."

“JD’s at 8, got it.”

“Thanks, Max.”

“No problem.” Max paused again, and then returned, her voice lowering in pitch. “He’s pretty pissed. I’ll pass along the message, but don’t get your hopes up.”

“I figured,” Steve sighed.

“Dustin’s glad your back. I am too.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. I swear, if I heard Dustin or Billy whine one more time about Steve fucking Harrington, I’d come to Boston myself just to kick your ass.”

“You’re a lot like your brother,” Steve laughed.

“Stepbrother. And, no, I’m not.”

She hung up.

Steve supposed she was right. Billy was stubborn and brash and easily angry, and so was Max. But Billy didn’t talk about things, didn’t deal with them, and when he was hurt he hid and let his pain simmer away inside and built up walls with no openings. Max, though, didn’t hold onto things. She let you know as soon as you hurt her. She’d keep letting you know until you apologized for it.

Steve took a long shower, and tried and failed not to think about Billy slamming the door over the phone. He felt too prickly, too nervous, to eat anything that day, so he survived on one cup of coffee until dinner, leaving the mug in places around the house and forgetting about it, and reheating it throughout the day.

At Dustin’s he felt better. Mrs. Henderson gave him one of her trademark hugs, and Dustin bounced around at Steve’s heels, telling him about his summer, his friends. Steve ate too much food and answered a lot of question via Mrs. Henderson about his life, and Boston. Dustin looked like he was going to cry when Steve gave him

the comics he found in an interesting shop by Rose's apartment, and Steve was almost glad it was close to eight, because he felt like he was going to cry, too, and he really didn't want to do that in front of Dustin and Mrs. Henderson.

He drove to the diner after that and sat in his car for a long time, staring at the flickering *open* sign and the few customers inside.

After working up his nerve Steve went inside.

It was eight exactly. An old man sat by himself at the counter, eating a burger and chatting with the waitress pouring coffee, who looked up when the bell above the door rang and gave Steve a wide smile, told him to sit anywhere he liked.

There was a couple in a booth in the corner, two seniors Steve thought he recognized. The guy kept missing his mouth with his fries, too busy staring at the girl.

Another couple sat in a booth on the other side, sharing a milkshake. They still had their uniforms on, one of them kept checking his radio, and Steve guessed they were still on duty. He couldn't remember their names. One was talking excitedly, waving his hands in the air animatedly, while the other laughed, wiping tears from his eyes.

Steve sat in a booth by the wide windows. He refused to look out them, because he didn't want to see how empty the parking lot in front was, how there was no Camaro there and there likely wouldn't be. But he couldn't help glancing up, just for a second, whenever headlights drove down the street.

He ordered a coffee, just black, when the waitress came by. He thought about getting one for Billy, extra cream and sugar, but he knew it'd be cold by the end of the night.

He sat on his hands because his fingers felt tingly. When they started getting numb he cupped his mug with his hands, needing to do something with them or else they'd keep shaking.

Elvis sang a few songs, no commercials on the radio at this hour.

The officers left, one of them getting a call, and shortly after the old

man did too.

*Landslide* came one, and Steve swallowed. Billy had a thing for Fleetwood Mac.

The couple in the corner were sitting in the same seat now, making eyes at each other.

Ottis Redding came on five minutes to nine, just as the bell on the door chimed.

Steve promised himself he wouldn't look up, that he'd play it cool and pretend he didn't notice. But he snapped his head around as the door swung closed.

Billy walked up to the counter, boots loud on the tiled floor, tucking a pack of Marbs into his chest pocket. He had the denim jacket on, the one that smelled like him around the collar.

He didn't look at Steve. He had his back to Steve, leaning against the counter. He flirted shamelessly with the waitress while she fixed him coffee, extra cream and extra sugar.

Steve looked down at his own mug. He had a wild urge to sprint out of the diner and drive all the way back to Boston.

Billy's black boots stopped at the table.

"Hey, Harrington."

Steve looked up.

He hadn't been Harrington for a while. He'd been Steve. He wondered what he'd been when he was gone.

He couldn't find the words to speak just yet. He knew his face was pink, he could feel the heat.

"Well? Can I sit?"

Steve nodded.

Billy sat across from him, setting his coffee on the table and crossing his arms over his chest. His eyes were gray and his jaw was set, nostrils flaring. He was pissed, Steve could feel it radiating off of him in angry waves. But he didn't shout, didn't throw anything. And he had come. Which was a good sign.

"I," Steve started. His voice cracked and he swallowed, tried again.  
"Ah. how are you?"

Billy glared at him.

"Right. Ok." Steve looked away, running his finger through his hair. He took a deep breath. "I guess I should start off by saying I'm sorry."

"You guess ?" Billy's voice was dangerously low.

Steve winced. "That came out wrong. I'm sorry. Billy, I'm so sorry. I fucked up. I've been a shitty -" What? Boyfriend? Friend? They never put a name on what they were to each other. "Person."

Billy didn't say anything, so Steve plowed on.

"I was awful to you. I was selfish, I was so shitty. I only thought about myself. I missed you so much when I was gone and I know it's too late for anything, but, shit, man, I just wanted to see you. And to tell you how," Steve broke off, his throat closing up. He looked down at his lap, blinking rapidly. His eyes burned at he prayed he wouldn't cry in front of Billy. "I'm just so sorry. I was an asshole and I'm so sorry."

He took a moment to breathe. The station traded Ottis' *Cigarettes and Coffee* for *Bring It On Home to Me*, and Sam Cooke's voice cut through the painful silence between them. The other couple had left. The waitress was wiping the table down, humming to herself and glancing at the clock, probably counting down until ten when she could kick them out and close up for the evening.

He heard Billy sigh.

"Fuck you. I fucking hate you, Steve Harrington."

Billy put his forehead in the heels of his hands, his fingers knitting

into his own hair and gripping it tight like he was going to pull it out from the roots.

Steve couldn't stop the tears this time. They fell silently down his cheeks and he crossed his arms, shoving his hand under his armpits because his hands were shaking so bad.

"I know," he started, voice cracking again.

"No, no, shut the fuck up." Billy gripped his hair tighter, and Steve panicked for a moment, afraid Billy really was going to tear his hair out.

Billy exhaled slowly through his nose. He let go of his hair and rubbed his red rimmed eyes angrily. He picked up his coffee and took a long drink, refusing to look at Steve.

He settled on the window instead, glaring at the movie theater across the street, the one they'd made out in, during those empty matinees many months ago.

"Jesus Christ, Harrington, I hate you. I hate you so much."

The waitress glanced over, Steve barely noticed but Billy gave her a paranoid look, lowering his voice.

"I wasn't going to come here tonight. I was going to sit out there," he jabbed a finger at the window, pointing at the street. Steve hadn't noticed it before but he saw it now: the Camaro parked a block away. "And watch you wait for me. I was gonna drink a beer and laugh at you and never show up because I fucking hate you. Because that's what you did to me, you fucking asshole. You," he glanced at the waitress again, lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. "You broke my heart. You left me here when you were the only thing that ever made me happy in this goddamn town. And I hate you because I stayed here even after you left. Part of me hoped it was some dumb joke and you'd show up again. And now you're here. And shit, I hate you. I hate that I waited for you, and I hate that you make me feel so out of control, and I *hate* what you do to me. I hate how crazy you make me feel. I hate how much I love you."

He chugged the rest of his coffee. He still wouldn't look at Steve, and he ignored the squeak Steve made at the last comment.

"I fucking worried about you, Harrington," he grumbled. "I never worry about anyone. But I kept thinking you were gonna get mugged, or eaten by a shark or some shit. I don't know, I've never been to the east coast. When Max told me a few days ago you were coming back I couldn't sleep. I was so scared, and I didn't really know why. And then I had this dream last night. I had a nightmare about you. That you came back to town and you were happy. Like really happy. And you didn't even recognize me. And I got so scared because, because I always wanted to be the one to make you happy. I hate that I still want to be that person."

He finally looked at Steve, and his eyes were softer now, watery, still gray and choppy, but like the calm after a storm. He looked so tired. Steve didn't notice before but Billy had dark circles under his eyes, tired pink smudges at the corners of his eyelids.

Steve wanted to reach out and pull Billy into his arms, hold him tight until he got a good night's sleep.

But he knew that wouldn't go over well.

He took a sip of his coffee, cold by now. He glanced at the clock. It was almost ten and the waitress shot them a reproachful look.

"Do you still have that beer?"

Billy looked like he was almost going to smile. "In my car."

"I'll, um, just pay for these real quick. And then." He hesitated. "Will you wait for me?"

"I'll be outside."

Billy didn't smile back when Steve did, but he didn't flinch or pull away when Steve reached under the table to brush his fingers against Billy's knee. Which was a good sign.

He jogged up to the counter, heard the bell tinkle as Billy stepped outside, and quickly paid for their coffee. He left a tip and hurried

outside.

Billy was there, standing in the parking lot and lighting a cigarette. Steve half-worried Billy would be gone. But he was there, one hand holding the cig between his fingers, the other hanging loosely at his side.

Steve stared at him for a moment. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach. He thought what he should say, that he was sorry again, that he loved Billy, too. But he wasn't sure Billy even realized he'd said the latter. And Steve had to work up his nerve to say that, perhaps with a few beers he'd be able to.

He went to Billy's side, nudging him with his shoulder. Billy almost smiled again, fought it down by sicking the cig between his teeth.

Steve decided to dedicate his time, perhaps his life, to pulling that smile out from wherever it liked to hide.

He couldn't say "I love you" just yet, so he settled on something else.

"You're better at talking."

"Yeah," Billy snorted. "Trying to work on that."

Steve wondered if it had something to do with Max, but he didn't ask. There would be plenty of time for that later.

He took hold of Billy's free hand. Billy didn't pull away, didn't flinch. He squeezed Steve's hand, gently, smoothing his thumb over Steve's knuckles.

And that was a good sign.